Orature to Literature: A Study of Tribal Festival Narratives and Folklores of Jharkhand

A Synopsis

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Introduction

The calendar overflows with festivities, boasting thirteen festivals spread across the twelve months of the year. “baro mase tero parban” is a popular Bengali proverb. This is quite prevalent of Chotanagpur, which is a plateau in Eastern India. It covers a large portion of Jharkhand State and extends into for neighbouring areas of West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, and Bihar. Every other day is a celebration for some religious or secular event and without exception this can also be said about the tribal festivals in the land of the forests, that is, Jharkhand. This state is not only rich in minerals but also rich in culture. There are thirty-two tribal communities in Jharkhand, who celebrate different festivals on different occasions which exhibit their culture, tradition, customs and rituals. The tribal festivals and *kathas* or festival narratives play an essential role in passing on the tribal culture to future generations. These festival narratives describe their proximally with nature, societal relations, their root, belief system, identity and much more. These festival narratives fall under the category of folklore or folk tales. In this context, Dr. Samira Sinha emphasizes the importance of folk tales in preserving values across generations in her article titled “Folklore of Environmental Protection”. She writes:

"Folk tales, in fact, have been able to pass down generations these values, with a few alterations corresponding to the change in the temperament of the storyteller. Initially an oral tradition, these have now found permanence in print and surprise us with the wisdom of those who knew how to live simply, with interdependence."(Sinha 576)

Sarhul, Rohin, Karma, Bhadu, Bandna, or *Sohorai*or *Ohira, Tusu,* and *Hal Phunia/Akhain Jatra,* are tribal festivals celebrated to worship the Almighty, Mother Earth or nature, spirits and ancestors. These festivals follow the agricultural cycle and also the seasonal cycles. Nature beautifies herself in different ways in every season and those

manifestations are worshipped through these festivals by the tribal people of Jharkhand. Festival narratives (*kathas*) remain a prime attribute of each festival, passed down from generation to generation.

Sarhul, one of the main festivals is celebrated on Chaitra Shukla Tritiya, the third day after the new moon in the month of Chitra, the last month of the Bengali calendar or the first month of the Hindu panchang calendar (March- April). This festival pays homage to Mother Earth and welcomes the advent of the spring season and new beginings. Rohin festival, on the other hand is celebrated in the month of Jeshtha (May - June), and is a paddy seed sowing festival. *Karam* festival and *Bhadu* festival are observed in the month of *Bhadra pad* (August- September) which is celebrated for good harvest and good health. *Bandna,* or *Sohorai* or *Ohira* is celebrated in the month of Kartik (October- November). It is about showing gratitude to the animals who have made immense contributions to agriculture and the ecosystym. Tusu is another festival which is celebrated from Aghan Sankranti to Poush Sankranti (mid-December to mid-January) and this too is a harvest festival. Then *Hal Phunia/Akhain Jatra* which is observed just the next day after of the end of the Tusu festival, and is a celebration of the farming and ploughing of fields the start of agriculture. Here all the festivals follow the seasonal and agricultural cycle. Rituals and *Kathas* have an immense role in maintaining that cycle of living. The constitute a body of literature which requires a close study.

Many festival narratives are there in print in Folklore of the *Santhal Parganas, Hanhn's Oraon Folk-lore in the Original, The Mundas Folktales and Elephant Stories.* However the narratives that surround the festivals of *Sarhul, Rohin, Karma, Bandna,* or *Sohorai* or *Ohira, Tusu,* and the variations that abound in different regions are not to be found in entirety. This study aims to bring the narratives and their variations together for a better analysis and understanding of the cultural ethos of Jharkhand.

As we know, many tribal literary compositions survive only in oral form. Tribals' languages, dialects, literature, culture, and traditions are still on the periphery of mainstream society. With the passage of time, these are facing the threat of extinction. But the value of these oral literary works is immense. Jharkhand is the hub of the indigenous people, therefore cultural diversity is also seen in the festivals and the way of life of the tribal people. Tribal activist, Dr Ram Dayal Munda has commented on the importance of the tribal festival, festival narratives and rituals "The purpose behind the rituals observed during festivals and in the rites of passage is to renew the relationship between the creator and the creation, and to preserve, promote and continue it through the Adivasi's role in a symbolic representation" (Munda 10).

Festival narratives of Chotanagpur's tribal festivals affirm trust in the Almighty and seek His blessings through nature. This research intends to focus on the festivals of *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna,/Sohorai /Ohira* and *Tusu.* It would also try to look into the festival narratives through the lens of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies is an umbrella term and an interdisciplinary approach that helps explore different perspectives through cultural practices. Ecocriticism can also be considered a part of Cultural Studies for its detailed application. "Ecocriticism is a critical mode that looks at the representations of nature and landscape in cultural text, paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and rhetoric employed when speaking about it..." (Nayar 242). This eocritical analysis helps to understand the importance of the festival narratives and appeal to rethink the relationship between natural world, and the tribal people. The study will also take into consideration the cultural approach to these festival narratives.

Cultural Studies examines how cultural forms—rituals, their symbolic significance, everyday practices, festivals, and their narratives—contribute to shaping deep and unique identities. Prominent theorists in this field include Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, whose

seminal works, *Culture and Society* (1958) and *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), respectively, provide foundational ideas.

In this context, Williams' concept of culture as a "whole way of life" and Hall's notion that cultural meanings are produced through representation are particularly relevant to the study of four selected festivals: Sarhul, Karma, Bandna/Sohrai, and Tusu. These festivals serve as powerful expressions of Adivasi identity, encapsulating their unique worldview, traditions, and connection to nature.

Additionally, Eco-criticism, which explores the relationship between literature, culture, and the environment, offers valuable insights into these festival narratives. This perspective highlights the festivals' ecological themes, such as reverence for nature, sustainability, and the interconnectedness of humans and the environment. Together, Cultural Studies and Eco-criticism provide a framework for analyzing the cultural and ecological significance of these festivals.

Literature Review

The Mundas and Their Country (1912) and *Oraon Religion and Customs* (1928), both written by Sarat Chandra Roy are keen discourses on the religion and customs of the Munda and Oraon tribes of Jharkhand. However there is very little discussion of the festival narratives associated with these.

The Oraons of Chotanagpur (1915) is also written by Anthropologist S.C. Roy. In this book, he describes the life of the Oraon people. *Oraon Religion and Customs* and *The Oraons of Chotanagpur*, these books of S.C. Roy, remain descriptive anthropological documentation without throwing any light on the folk tales and narratives that form the culture that form the culture that makes them an ethnic community.

Adi-dharam(2014) is written by Dr Ram DayalMunda. In this book, he describes the religious beliefs of tribal people of India especially about the Munda tribe. He has also mentioned about *Sarhul*, *Sohorai* and *Karam* festivals but there very few descriptions of festival narratives. It is available in English in a slim volume.

Sanskritization vs Nirbakization (2012) is written by Pashupati Prasad Mahato. In this book, he describes Kudmi culture and the Tusu festival.

Folklore of the Santhal Parganas (1909) is written by Cecil Henry Bompas. In this book, He mentioned several folklores but there is only one festival narrative related to Karama festival. It is the story of Karma- Dharma (Page No.: 32-35).

Hans's Oraon Folk-Lore in the Oiginal (1931) is written by A. Grignard. In this book, He also mentioned several folklores but there are only two festival narratives related to Sarhul and Karama festival.

The Munda Folktales & Elephant Stories (2023) is written by Santosh Kiro. In this book, He documents many creation myths but there is only one Sarhul festival narrative. It is Sarhul, the Tree Story (Page No.: 17-20).

Silent Spring (2020) is written by Rachel Carson. In this book, she has created an awareness of the environment. This book will help to develop the theory of eco-critical perspective and help to understand the ecocentric worldview through the festival narratives.

Staying Alive (1988) is written by Vandana Shiva. In this book, she has linked ecology, women and development. There are many Tusu songs mentioned in this book that describe the life of women, Goddess Tusu and contemporary time. This book helps in analysing to analysis the connection between women and ecology.

Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: *From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* (2018) is written by Pramod K. Nayar. In this book, he has elaborated a chapter on eco-criticism. It will help to understand the theory and will also help in linking it with festival narratives.

Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the teaching of plants (2013) is written by Robin Wall Kimmerer. In this book, she mentions indigenous wisdom, scientific inquiry and personal story telling. These all help to understand the sense of kinship with all living beings through the tribal culture, festival narratives and folklores.

Research Gap

While some volumes of translation of stories related to festivals are available in English as tribal folklores of Chotanagpur. Further comprehensive documentation and analysis of these narratives are yet to be done. This study aims to address the research gap by gathering the stories which abound in oral form. Further it aims to document and analyse them.

Statement of the Problem

Tribal communities share a strong communion and festivals are celebration of this unity. Every festival has its own share stories which make it unique. Festival narratives can be discussed and analysed from various perspectives. However, most of these are in oral form or in scattered print. This study will search, document and analyse festival narratives of four festivals, namely, *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna/Sohorai*/*Ohira* and *Tusu*, not only to preserve them but also to analyse the practices of eco-sustainability and eco-spirituality inherent in these tales.

Research Questions

- What are the *lok kathas* (festival narratives) especially those associated with *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna/Sohorai*/*Ohira* and *Tusu*?
- What are the variations of these festival narratives from one region to another?
- What is the role and significance of festival narratives of the select festivals?
- How do the tribal people celebrate and preserve nature through their observance of these festivals?
- Can these festival narratives be read from the perspective of cultural studies?
- Can these folklores be studied from an eco-critical perspective?

Research Objectives

- To search and collect the *lok kathas* associated with *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna,/Sohorai*/*Ohira,* and *Tusu*.
- To gain an understanding of the several variants of festival narratives of the selected festivals.
- To examine the role and the significance of the rituals and festival narratives of these festivals.
- To analyse the select festivals and their narratives from cultural studies perspective.
- To understand the tribal lifestyle through their observance of these festivals through an eco-critical perspective.

Hypothesis

This research on festival narratives focuses on the strong bond between tribals and nature. It will be analysed through the collection of festival narratives and their variations. It will help to understand the role and the significance of the festival narratives of the selected four festivals of Chotanagpur i.e. *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna,/Sohorai*/*Ohira* and *Tusu*. It will also help to understand the tribal lifestyle through the observance of these festivals. Folklore is a repository of stories that emphasise the connection between the human and non human world and between individual and community. Festivals provide an opportunity to reiterate festival narratives in an effort to keep them alive in the collective memory of the community but in the interpretation of modern popular culture is slowly erasing these narratives from the community memory, it is important therefore, to document such narratives which engender respect for nature and create a strong bond between the human and no-human before they disappear.

Methodology

Empirical Research: This research would follow the qualitative method of empirical research. Questionnaires, Interviews, and recordings will be part of it.

Theoretical Analysis: This research will use the theoretical framework of eco criticism, in its study of the festival narratives of *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna,/Sohorai*/*Ohira,* and *Tusu* festivals.

Qualitative analysis of the books, stories that already exist in print in libraries also be part of the detailed study.

Research Plan

The proposed thesis will be divided into the following chapters:

Chapter I : Introduction

Chapter II : Literature Review

Chapter III : Tusu and Sarhul: Variations and Significance

Chapter IV : Karma and Sohorai: Variations and Significance

Chapter V : Festivals Narratives through Cultural Studies and Eco-critical Perspectives.

Chapter VI : Conclusion

Bibliography

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter will explore folk culture and folk literature, encompassing both written and oral traditions. Folk culture represents the collective practices and values of communities, which are deeply intertwined with their lived experiences. It will delve extensively into the significance of festivals within folk communities, highlighting their cultural, social, and spiritual importance.

The chapter will also discuss the critical frameworks, such as Cultural Studies and Ecocriticism, that will guide the analysis. Additionally, it will include an overview of the literature review, identification of research gaps, formulation of the statement of the problem, research questions, objectives, hypothesis, and research methodology to establish the foundation for the study

Chapter II: Literature Review

In this chapter, the details of the festival and the various documented festival narratives associated with these festivals, *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna/Sohorai*/*Ohira,* and *Tusu* will be discussed. It will provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literary works on festivals, with a particular focus on those four selected festivals.

This chapter will review the existing literature related to festival narratives, cultural context and ecological aspects. Additionally, It will also highlight the research gap in this fields and will explore the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the festival narratives.

Chapter III: Tusu and Sarhul: Variations and Significance

This chapter will try to find out the variations among festival narratives of Tusu and Sarhul from one place to another and in different tribes. It will also examine the significance of the festival narratives of these two select festivals.

The Tusu festival, rooted in the tale of the king and his daughter, Tusu symbolizes collective remembrance and celebration of life. It is observed during Makar Sankranti, a time marking harvest and transition, signifying both endings and new beginnings. The story of Tusu emphasizes the themes of remembrance, healing, and resilience. It represents the human need to preserve the memory of loved ones, even in the face of grief and loss. Likewise, the story of Bindi, the daughter of mother Earth, which is one of the popular Sarhul festival narratives, reflects the agrarian worldview of the Adivasi communities. The spiritual and cultural significance of such festival narratives in their various forms will be analysed in this chapter.

Chapter IV: Karma and Sohorai: Variations and Significance

This chapter will try to find out the variations among festival narratives of Karma and Sohorai from one place to another and in different tribes. It will also examine the significance of the festival narratives of these two select festivals.

The story of the seven brothers in the Karam festivals highlights the sacred connection between humans and nature, represented by the karam tree. It teaches the importance of respecting traditions and honoring deities that symbolize fertility, prosperity, and balance.

The story of Marangburu and the divine bovines symbolizes the interconnectedness between humans, animals, and the divine. It underscores the cultural and spiritual significance of cattle in tribal societies, where they are considered life-sustaining and sacred.

Chapter V: Festivals Narratives through Cultural Studies and Eco-critical Perspectives.

This chapter will try to analyse the select festivals and festival narratives from Cultural Studies and eco-critical perspective. The festival narratives highlight the intrinsic relationship between humans and nature. They stress the dependence on natural resources, the reverence for ecological entities (trees, cattle), and the consequences of environmental disregard. These tales advocate for sustainable living and ecological balance, positioning nature as a central, life-giving force rather than a resource to exploit.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

In this chapter, a conclusion based on the findings of the preceding chapters will be drawn. It will try to show whether the different festival narratives play any role in the tribal way of life: how the tribal people preserve nature through the celebration/observance of these festivals. Each of these tribal festival narratives— Tusu, Sarhul, , Karam, and Sohrai— reflects the deep connection between humans, nature, and the divine. This findings of the analysis of the variations of the festival narratives among the tribes and their contemporary significance shall contribute this chapter.

Research Limitation

- Of the many tribal festivals of Jharkhand, this study will focus on the festival narratives of the four selected festivals namely *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna/Sohorai*/*Ohira,* and *Tusu.*
- The selected festivals are celebrated not only in Jharkhand but also in Orissa, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Assam. There are certain variations in the rituals of these festivals in those states. But this research would be confined to Jharkhand.

The Scope of the Study

This research will be a collection and documentation of the festival narratives of the four selected festivals, *Sarhul, Karma, Bandna/Sohorai*/*Ohira,* and *Tusu* festivals. It will help further research in the field of representation of tribal ethos in literature in academia. The significance of the festival narratives would help others to make out the tribal way of life. This research will also emphasise the importance of endangered tribal culture and the significance of festival narratives in preserving it and hence the need to document and analyse it.

Conclusion

Tribal festival narratives narrate the story of tribal society, culture, tradition, God, Goddess, spirits and ancestors. It strengthens tribal peoples' faith in the Almighty and they find their Almighty through nature. Tribal people are sensitive towards nature and they are much aware of the proportion of consumption from nature. Smar Bosu Mullick has commented on the preface of Dr Ram DayalMunda's book, *Adi-dharam* (2014), "*Adivasis* are going to play a historical role in presenting an alternative way of life and belief that is capable of protecting the planet and the people from the impending threat of anthropogenic disaster." Nature and tribal people are so close that at every festival, they show gratitude to mother nature and celebrate their strong relationship. Festival narratives play an immense role in passing this bond between humans and nature to the future generation. *Sarhul* is a spring festival that embraces the beauty of nature with beautiful sal flowers. *Karam* is celebrated by wishing for bountiful rice, *Tusu* is observed to show gratitude to nature and Sohrai is also an expression of gratitude towards the domestic animals for their immense contribution to agriculture. All these festivals and festival narratives develop a sense of gratitude and reverence, and teach us the way of life by coming close to nature. This research

topic, hopes to unearth and document the festival narratives of the selected tribal festivals of Chotanagpur and endeavour to fulfil its objectives.

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